OUR OCEAN BACKYARD

COLUMN NO. 284

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Moss Landing Expands

With a wharf, warehouses, and a bridge across the old Salinas River channel to the sand spit, business picked up quickly for Charles Moss and Cato Vierra at what was soon to become Moss Landing. Fishermen and whalers had a way to ship their products, and in time there were fish processing plants (using the local harvested salt for preservation) and fish canneries. As San Francisco boomed after the Gold Rush, potatoes, sugar beets and lumber were shipped from Moss Landing to San Francisco as well.

About 1890, the Pajaro Valley Consolidated Railroad was constructed and passed through Moss Landing as it connected Spreckels (near Salinas) with Watsonville. Claude Spreckels built the railway primarily to serve the Western Beet Sugar Company (which later became Spreckels Sugar Company) in Watsonville. This expanded both the number of different products and also the volume of trade in and out of Moss Landing by ship.

A Norwegian whaling station was established on the sand spit in 1919 and continued to operate until 1926. A fish canning plant replaced it and then additional canneries were built. Moss Landing was growing and diversifying.

Eventually Charles Moss sold his interests in the area to the Pacific Coast Steamship Company. The locals thought enough of his role in putting the area on the map, however, to adopt his name for the small community. It was originally just called Moss, with the Moss Post Office opening in 1895, but the name was changed in 1917 to Moss Landing.

After selling his local businesses, Charles Moss moved to southern Oregon, where gold had been discovered. He took on a new role and served as the sheriff of Josephine County from 1890 to 1894. I took a personal interest in learning this as I lived on a farm in Josephine County outside of the small town of Wilderville, just south of Grants Pass, for several years in the early 1950s. The records show that Charles Moss soon returned to Texas and died there at the age of 83 in 1896.

In the early 1870s, Cato Vierra replaced the original ferry across the mouth of Elkhorn Slough with a toll bridge, which was located at essentially the same place as the present Highway One Bridge. He continued to operate the bridge until 1889, when he sold it to Monterey County for the princely sum of $4,250.

Cato and his wife, Maria de Freitas, raised 14 children that lived and worked in the area: Frank, Carlos, Maria, Joseph, David, Edward, Emeline, Frances, Mabel, Albert (who drowned when just two years old), Virginia, Albert T., Louis, and another who died in infancy. The family developed a ranch of over 1000 acres on the north side of the Elkhorn Slough Bridge and continued to diversify their efforts at Moss Landing. Cato died in 1900 at what today seems like the young age of 65, but his sons continued and expanded their businesses in the area.

In 1904 several of the enterprising Vierra sons planted oyster beds in Elkhorn Slough. Although it took 20 years to produce results, on September 12, 1924, they announced “a new industry for Moss Landing that is destined to be profitable…. as the whaling business and not nearly as offensive to the smell”.

Another name long associated with the history of Moss Landing is Sandholdt, which is the name of the main road running along the length of the sandspit. William Sandholdt, who spent part of his boyhood in Watsonville, and later owned newspapers in Monterey, took an active role in Moss Landing beginning in 1923. The decline in the grain growing business in the Salinas Valley, in addition to competition from the Southern Pacific Railroad, took its toll on the prosperity of Moss Landing and it’s shipping business.

At this point William Sandholdt acquired the property and had some initial success making it a fishing and camping resort. The old wharf was beginning to suffer from age, and in 1929 Sandholdt rebuilt the wharf. He convinced the Standard Oil Company to make Moss Landing its import location for refined petroleum products. He also was able to encourage the Hammond Lumber Company to make this a major distribution point for lumber on the central coast. This little port has more history ahead, however.